Trespassing on Mr. Burroughs

By GEORGIA JACKSON

"THAT'S Mr. Burroughs' fence you ate your supper on," said the gray lady. I wasn't surprised. It looked like the sort of fence Mr. Burroughs would have—a low stone wall, topped with ivy, where a hungry hiker might find a bare spot to make coffee and drink it the while she gladdened her eyes with the green slope edged with shrubbery and the leisurely Hudson beyond.

"I ought to call and pay my respects," I said. So I went down the steep path from the highway, past a friendly calf, to a summerhouse overlooking the river, where I could see the top of a gray head above a high-backed chair, and a young woman sitting on a bench. At the sight of the top of that gray head I felt the thrill of trepidation which only comes when one is going to see for the first time a celebrity one has heard about all one's life. I was right. The top of the gray head belonged to Mr. Burroughs. He rose to greet me—frail, but vigorous, keen-eyed, aureoled with gray hair and beard. My heart did homage to his true venerableness. His face is a fine face. When he spoke, it was with a gentle, even voice that gave no hint of age. Neither was there hint of age in his simple, kindly words. I explained my intrusion, saying, "They tell me I ate my supper on your fence."

He laughed indulgently. "You should have come in and eaten it in my summerhouse," he replied. "I saw you on the road this afternoon when I was out driving, and I said to my friends, 'There's a girl out for a walk.'"

One of the trees near the summerhouse had sent a branch down near his chair. "See what I have here," he said, pulling the branch down a little. It was a bird's nest, with four blue-green speckled eggs in it.

"What kind of bird is it?" I asked, rather ashamed not to know.

"Oh, the little social sparrow," he replied. "She sits there by my ear and broods on her eggs, and I sit here in my chair and brood on my thoughts." A twinkle came into his eyes and his voice. "I don't think she will addle the eggs, but sometimes I am afraid I addle my thoughts. Maybe you'd like to see my study where I hatch them out," he added, and led the way, only a step or two, to a little square building, delightfully covered with bark outside. Inside, the study consists of one spacious, well-lighted room, with front windows opening on the river. Of course there are books marching around the room in built-in bookcases, and these yield ground only to those honored rivals, a generous fireplace and windows where the trees can look in at their busy friend. In the midst is a large writing table with an orderly litter of papers on it. Mr. Burroughs sat down in the comfortable working-chair beside it, and I thought how many times he must have lifted his eyes from his writing to let them rest on the Hudson gleaming through the trees. He waved his hand toward a cluster of portraits near by.

"I have some of my friends with me, you see," he said.

His friends! I rather knew whom to expect; Roosevelt, of course—a handsome full-length photograph; Whitman, John Muir, Edison, and many other familiar faces. There was a group of older scientists and philosophers. Then there was Carlyle, and several fine pictures of Emerson.

"I see you like Emerson," I said. "I grew up on him."

"So did I," he said with enthusiasm. "That portrait of him I picked up in London. It must have been taken when he was over there."

"Speaking of growing up," I said, "one of the things I fed on was your 'Serene I fold my hands and wait.' That was my introduction to you, and was one of my dishpan poems. I hated to wash dishes when I was a little girl, and relieved the tedium by memorizing poems I liked."

Edison's photograph reminded me of the holiday these two and others took together last year; Mr. Burroughs smiled as I mentioned it. "Yes, we had a fine time," he said, and spoke of similar projects on foot.

"Mr. —— says he wants the party to go to Europe—to take a house in London and then tour the country and the continent from there, going through the war district," and to my inward astonishment at the thought of such a jaunt for an octogenarian, he added quite casually, "I don't know which of the plans he will finally adopt, but I told him I was ready for any of them, though I prefer Europe."

As we left the study, my conscience smote me, and I prefaced a withdrawal with a remark about "taking up so much of his time."

"My time isn't worth much this time of day," he said. "You are quite welcome to stay if you wish."

So we sat down in the summerhouse and talked.

"You have another home a few miles from here, haven't you?" I asked.

"Yes—Slabsides—just a cabin in the woods. We're going over there for a picnic tomorrow. This place we call Riverby. In the summer I usually spend some time up at Roxbury, where I was a boy."

One of my reasons for wanting to talk to Mr. Burroughs had been to get confidential information about some other writers. So I asked him in general about some "naturalists" whom I had recently heard were improving upon nature.

"I can smell a nature-faker," he said, and raised his head with a whimsical gesture, breathing in a great sniff, "just like I can smell a skunk. They always give themselves away."

I mentioned a well-known name, tentatively.

"Yes, I'd be rather careful about him," said the gentle old man. "I've known for a long time now that he wasn't quite right, and I'm glad other people are beginning to find out. I'd like to have him know that I think he's a faker," his smiling eyes swung around to me, "but you can see I wouldn't quite like to sit down and write him that I think so. Now I wouldn't call Mr. —— a faker," he went on, "because he is frankly a romancer. He doesn't take liberties with nature and then say it's true." Another was summed up: "He's a good fellow—I think he's a good fellow all right. He can imitate the call of wild animals the best of anybody I ever knew. He sent me a very cordial invitation to come out to his place this spring, but I told him I had an engagement at that time with the Vassar girls, and of course I couldn't disappoint them." In general Mr. Burroughs was a discerning critic, and a kindly one, generous in his praise of his colleagues.

I spoke of Viscount Grey's little book "Recreation," in which he tells of taking Roosevelt to hear the English birds. Mr. Burroughs had not seen it. "Roosevelt told me about that walk," he said. "I must send for the book."

"He had to make Roosevelt wade across a mud puddle," I said, "but the Colonel didn't mind it."

"Mind it!" said Mr. Burroughs with delight. "I should say not. He would go into a stream up to his waist and think nothing of it. The last outing I took with him was down at a place they called Pine Knot—a big barracks of a house miles away from anywhere. They lived and cooked downstairs and slept upstairs. He took me along to help him name his birds. I've never written that up yet; I will some day."

He began talking of his reading, and naturally it was not long before we got to the heart of things.

"I am convinced of a directing intelligence," he said, after disposing of this scientist and that philosopher.

"These birds and these trees know what to do; something tells them. There is the law in everything. I believe that God is in everything—immanent. And therefore my friends tell me I am a pantheist. But the good church folk say that God is a spirit; and I say, 'Where is he?' and they answer, 'Why, everywhere.' So in the end we agree. As for immortality—I see nothing to prove it—"

"Or to disprove it?" I suggested.

"Or to disprove it. There is one thing," he brought his hand down with a light blow of contentment on the arm of his chair, "if there isn't immortality, we'll never know it. And if there is immortality, we'll have to accept it and put up with it the best we can."

In a moment he went on. "I have a book now going through the press in which I have tried to say how these things look to me—a sort of summing up of the conclusions of four score years of reading, observation, and thought. I call the book "Accepting the Universe." You remember that Margaret Fuller once said she accepted the universe, and when Carlyle heard it, he said, 'Gad, she'd better!'" He smiled thoughtfully and then epitomized the book for me. But here I am quoting his words not from memory, but from the book itself, which has just appeared: "I have concluded . . . . that this is the best possible world, and these people in it are the best possible people. The heart of Nature is sound. I feel toward the great Mother somewhat as a man does who takes out a policy in an insurance company: he believes the company is solvent and will meet its obligations. I look upon the universe as solvent and worthy of trust . . . . Theological grounds do not count with me. I want nothing less than a faith founded upon a rock, faith in the constitution of things. The various man-made creeds are fictitious, like the constellations—Orion, Cassiopeia's Chair, the Big Dipper; the only thing real in them is the stars, and the only thing real in the creeds is the soul's aspiration toward the Infinite."

It was growing dusk when I rose to go. "I'll never forget this as long as I live, Mr. Burroughs," I said, and he sped me on my way with kind words.

The gray lady called to me as I went by her gate, "Did you see him?"

"Yes," I said, "I've had a long talk with him."

"He's a fine old man," she said heartily. "The minister sometimes preaches about him. He says this would be a better world if there were more men in it like Mr. Burroughs."

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MR. BURROUGHS ENJOYING HIS STUDY

Waiting

SERENE I fold my arms and wait,
Nor care for wind, or tide, or sea:
I rave no more 'gainst time or fate,
For lo! my own shall come to me.

I stay my haste, I make delays,
For what avails this eager pace?
I stand amid the eternal ways,
And what is mine shall know my face.

Asleep, awake, by night or day,
The friends I seek are seeking me;
No wind can drive my bark astray,
Nor change the tide of destiny.

What matter if I stand alone?
I wait with joy the coming years;
My heart shall reap where it has sown,
And garner up its fruit of tears.

The waters know their own, and draw
The brook that springs in yonder height;
So flows the good with equal law
Unto the soul of pure delight.

The floweret nodding in the wind
Is ready plighted to the bee;
And, maiden, why that look unkind?
For lo! thy lover seeketh thee.

The stars come nightly to the sky;
The tidal wave unto the sea;
Nor time, nor space, nor deep, nor high
Can keep my own away from me.

JOHN BURROUGHS.